

I'M FIGHTING FOR MY LIFE": PLANNED ALBERTA TRANSMISSION LINE LEAVES LANDOWNERS FEELING POWERLESS

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Kim Trithart looks across the field west of her farm bungalow, past a stand of poplars turning autumn yellow, and sees trouble on the horizon.

Her property is one of hundreds in northern Alberta that could soon be traversed by the V-shaped towers of a massive 500-kilovolt power transmission line between the Fort McMurray area and a substation near the Genesee generating plant.

She's worried the line, which will run through two of her quarter-sections and come within 1.5 kilometres of her front deck, will hurt the family's cattle-and-grain operation, their health and the rural view she has enjoyed for more than 30 years.

"Every morning I'm going to wake up and I'm going to see that tower. It's not right — why does the government get to tell us what to do?" she asks.

"My son will be the third-generation farmer, and this thing isn't needed. It sure as hell isn't wanted."

The 500-kilometre long Fort McMurray West line is one of six projects approved by the former Progressive Conservative government as critical infrastructure to address concerns about serious provincial power-transmission bottlenecks.

In 2014, Alberta PowerLine, a partnership between Calgary-based Atco and Quanta Services of Houston, Tex., was selected to design, build, own, operate and finance the \$1.4-billion scheme.

It will use 1,100 towers up to 53 metres high (depending on location) supported by guy wires and following a right-of-way averaging 60 metres wide.

The Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) must still approve the route, which includes deciding whether to go along Alberta PowerLine's preferred western corridor from north of Onoway to northwest of Wabasca or an eastern option.

But hundreds of individuals and landowner groups, Metis communities, First Nations and private companies have objected to some aspect of the route in advance of AUC hearings that start Oct. 12.

The objections include an oil and gas company worried it won't be able to work leases, residents south of Highway 43 concerned about their health, farms and safety, and a trapper arguing he won't be properly compensated for the disruption of his livelihood.

The hearing was delayed last June by the Fort McMurray fire.

It was then scheduled to start Monday, but was put off again to deal with constitutional challenges from several aboriginal parties arguing they haven't been properly consulted about the project.

"There's a lot of our members who pick berries in that area; they harvest traditional medicines," says Bruce Gladue, director of sustainable development and industry relations for the Metis Nation of Alberta, which recently withdrew from the hearing.

"Our hunters and trappers, they worry that with a line like that being opened up, there's less cover for deer and moose."

He doesn't oppose the development, but wants to see mitigation strategies in place that could involve joint environmental monitoring or community benefits such as scholarships, jobs and work for Metis contractors.

Trithart lives about 40 kilometres west of Morinville on the home quarter her late husband Larrie Krause bought in the 1970s, when he was 17.

She and their two teenaged children have handled the 200 head of cattle and eight quarters of pasture and crops since Krause died of cancer in 2014.

Last month, she consented to one of two paths proposed that will go through her land, unhappy with her decision but advised she couldn't fight them both.

She'd gladly give up the thousands of dollars she'll receive from the project if the whole thing just went away.

"I feel like I signed with the devil, but I did what I had to do ... If it's something you don't want, millions of dollars isn't enough."

Dean Dumbeck, who lives in Westlock County, is a co-ordinator for the East Route Landowners Opposition Group, which wants the eastern option taken off the table.

"We built our house — it's kind of our dream home — here. It's put us about 400 metres away from the (potential) line," he says.

"I never fathomed it would be so close ... That broke my heart, that we spent two years building it and seven years in the (planning). It was devastating."

His informal organization represents about 250 property owners.

They argue the eastern alternative will affect more people, do more harm to woods and wildlife, travel within 800 metres of more homes and go closer to more sensitive water bodies than the west route.

Dumbeck, whose wife had a baby boy last week, is particularly worried electric and magnetic fields could make his son sick with such serious illnesses as childhood leukemia.

He's also apprehensive about the impact on property values, although as non-farmers he says the project will affect them less than neighbours in the agriculture industry.

However, even with these forbodings, he still agrees the transmission line is required.

"Alberta does need power one way or another ... There's no sense fighting the project. It's going through. It's just a question of where."

Alberta PowerLine vice-president Carey Kostyk says the company has done detailed studies of environmental, construction, economic and other issues, and feels any concerns can be mitigated.

One advantage of the western route is that most of it would be built close to an existing 240-kilovolt line, limiting disturbances of the countryside, he says.

About 80 per cent of the landowners along this corridor have consented to it.

"We recognize the line itself, no matter what type of tower, is going to have an impact ... Farming, visual, environmental costs, all these items are taken into account in our consultations," he says.

"The real point is to have the lowest impact overall ... We know it's a real personal interpretation of what those impacts are."

Landowners are eligible for compensation, including a \$500-an-acre entry fee, \$350 to \$1,600 annually per V-shaped tower (depending on location and land use), and \$10,000 per parcel for early acceptance of the right-of-way agreement and access.

An Alberta PowerLine posting says the electric field from transmission lines is comparable to household wiring, and studies done since the 1970s don't show an impact on human or animal health.

But Trithart still hopes something, maybe aboriginal legal challenges, will stop the development in its tracks.

"I'm fighting for my life, I'm fighting for my kids ... This is their future," she says.

"Every time they look out from the living room they're going to see that power line. I feel like (I) screwed up."

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What's Next

An Alberta Utilities Commission route hearing will start at 9 a.m. Oct. 12 at Edmonton's Best Western Plus Westwood Inn, 18035 Stony Plain Rd.

The hearing is expected to last about six weeks. Construction of the line could start next March and it is scheduled to go into service in June 2019.

The project, likely to employ more than 500 people at the peak of construction, is intended to transmit electricity to Fort McMurray. Northern cogeneration power plants will sometimes also supply other parts of the province to the south.

The line won't be used for exports to the United States, the Alberta Electric System Operator (AESO) says.

Two critical transmission infrastructure projects between the Edmonton area and southern Alberta are completed, along with one around Edmonton to the northeast Industrial Heartland and one around Calgary.

The launch of the last one, the Fort McMurray East link with the Industrial Heartland, has been deferred because of the current economy downturn; an update on the scheme will be released next year.